

TRANSACTIONAL EDUCATION AND TRANSACTIONAL EDUCATORS: FOSTERING THE HABIT OF 'USING INTELLIGENCE FULLY'

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I. Introduction

This paper calls into question the assumptions implicit in many traditional theories of moral agency; namely, the assumption that moral agency requires the agent to be disinterested, disengaged, and psychically distant in order to be a good moral agent, an agent worthy of moral praise. I explore the nature of what it means to be a moral agent and, more broadly, what it means to live well as a human being and apply this analysis to education. The arguments made are grounded in a naturalistic-transactional understanding of how the human being comes to be and continues to be in this world and spells out some of the implications of this understanding of the human individual for education. In addition, I suggest specific strategies for capitalizing on the transactional potential of the educational relationship between student and teacher. I argue that, if we take the human being to be a transactional being, i.e., an entity that comes into existence and continues to exist necessarily in and through co-constitutional exchanges with both human and non-human entities, then the role of education becomes central to this development of the individual. Further, it also becomes clear that education must be of a particular nature if it is going to foster the immediate and ongoing development of that individual as a flourishing human being. However, we must first explore briefly what is problematic about our traditional conception of education in order to see that change is required.

II. Non-Transactional Conception of Human Flourishing and Education

Traditionally speaking, in order for acts of free agency to occur

and in order for enlightenment to be achieved, it is often maintained that the self must be in a position of untainted and unencumbered freedom; the self, it is thought, must be disinterested, disengaged, and psychically distant in order to be a moral or epistemological agent. It is only from this position of “freedom” that the individual is thought to make choices that are self-determined and freely chosen. Further, it is only from this position that the individual is thought to be able to become a fully actualized human being. There are various problems associated with this conception. In this essay I look most closely at these problems as they relate to education.

Most educators hold their students’ achievement of genuine moral and epistemological agency as one of their implicit and explicit goals as educators. However, the above mentioned assumptions about the characteristics of genuine moral and epistemological agency lead educators to foster a particular notion of actualization, one equated with a particular notion of autonomy and independence, that is fundamentally problematic. To understand this we must acknowledge that actualization and hence, in this case, independence is most typically equated with freedom, and this takes on the meaning of being able to think and act without dependence on or influence from one’s economic, social, cultural, familial, etc. location. This leads to the tendency to emphasize skills and practices that tend to foster only one type of agency, the agency that allows for and values the kind of autonomy and disinterested neutrality required by this concept of a minded-self versus a body-minded self, i.e., by a concept that locates the “real” self in the mind rather than in a body and, hence, as disconnected from others rather than connected.

Thus, this concept of the independent and free self, the decontextualized agent, leaves behind certain perceptions, feelings, ways of knowing the world, etc. that are not possible without the body. The end result is devaluing of pedagogical practices that foster learning and ways of knowing that are body-minded in focus. Further, if the value of contextualized knowing and, to provide one example, “emotional intelligence,” is overtly recognized, it is often also scoffed at, quietly

belittled on the side, or left unsupported on the level of curricula, policy, and budget allocation. Perhaps of greater concern, however, are the pedagogical effects that result from an internalized notion of actualization and agency as necessarily decontextualized in nature. Even well intended educators can be found to operate with this notion of the self and the self as agent and, perhaps unknowingly, perpetuate the view and the problematic effects along with it.

However, what if we were to embrace an alternate, a more contextual and dynamic notion of the self and its formation? Specifically, what if we understood the self to be a transactionally existing self, a self that does and can exist only in and through contextual exchanges with others that continually make and re-make the self and others with whom this self transacts?

III. Three Conceptions of the Metaphysics of the Individual

In *Art as Experience*, as well as else where, Dewey puts forth his transactional understanding of human existence and argues that humans cannot and do not exist as isolated and atomistic beings. Rather, who we are, what we think, what we desire, what we know, and how we come to interact with others is an ongoing product of the continuous exchanges had with both our human and nonhuman surroundings. The individual and its relation to its surroundings is, as Shannon Sullivan points out in what might be a simple yet illustrative metaphor, most accurately represented by a stew. The stew, unlike a tossed salad or a melting pot, illustrates how the individual remains distinct from its environment even while it takes on the flavors and characteristics of its surroundings.¹ Within and through formative exchanges with our surroundings and others in these surroundings, we adopt, adjust, refine, reject, etc. the various habits that make up who we are and it is through these that we are able to transform our own selves as well as other selves with whom and with which we interact. We are, Dewey argues, an “interpenetration of habits”² and as such are the agents of change that affect change through exchanges with others within particular contexts and particular relationships.

Embracing this as the necessary nature of the individual and as that which must frame our goals and aspirations within education yields certain implications for education.

First and foremost, with the realization and the acceptance of the transactional notion of the individual as the ground for our pedagogical endeavors, the goal of fostering disinterested, detached, and psychically distant agency in our students would be rejected as both impossible and undesirable. It would be impossible because it would conflict with what we would now accept as the necessary nature of human existence. If human existence is, as the transactional notion of the individual suggests, always and necessarily embodied and contextualized and if the individual becomes what is and continues to become what it will be only in and through embodied and contextualized co-exchanges with others, then maintaining a goal of the disinterested, detached, and psychically distant thinking and living being is unachievable.

Further, this goal would no longer seem desirable, even if it were possible, because it would require us to set aside the very relations and connections that make us what we are and provides the possibilities of what we can possibly come to be. Instead, educators would now strive to formulate and prioritize pedagogical goals around those qualities of existence that facilitate positive transactional exchanges between the individual and the other. It is in these exchanges that the individual is able to grow and thrive as the transactional being that he or she is. Educators would not understand positive growth or the “good” toward which education should strive as that which fosters ongoing transactions with different others and that does so with a pluralistic set of values and approaches to living and being in the world. It is this that will best generate the exchanges that will encourage change and growth toward possibilities of richer transactions and further growth.³

Embracing this transactional notion of the individual and the connected notion of “good” makes possible exploration into the specific strategies, skills, and even attitudinal approaches of interaction

that would best foster this notion of positive transactional exchanges. Specifically, educators embracing this notion of the transactional individual will seek to foster in their students and in their exchanges with students a certain quality of what might be called “Socratic wisdom,” coupled with the skill of hypothetical construction, and the “habit of using intelligence fully.”⁴ Shannon Sullivan’s analysis of the importance of “Socratic wisdom” for the achievement of good communication can offer insights for the student-educator relationship as this too is a relationship that depends largely on good communication to achieve its goals.

Sullivan explains that “Socratic wisdom” requires that all individuals cultivate within themselves an appreciation and acceptance that one may be ignorant or wrong and need to revise what one holds to be true. The individual who tries to communicate or convey an idea with an other has Socratic wisdom if he or she realizes that the habitual and nonreflective ways in which human beings come to understand other people may contribute to misunderstandings.⁵ The process of communicating one’s assumptions and readying oneself to adjust those assumptions and one’s behaviors in response to the other is what Sullivan calls “hypothetical construction.”⁶

Hypothetical construction is “a process by which one creates meaning with others by offering potential meaning to them as a hypothesis.”⁷ Rather than imposing meaning onto the world and to those we encounter in the world, a person engaging in hypothetical construction suggests meaning based on their interpretation of the facts and perceptions available to them and leaves open a dialogue for continued creation of meaning and revision of already suggested meanings. This leads to “transactional meanings” or meanings that have been “mutually negotiated and developed by all parties involved.”⁸

Looking at the student-educator relationship, hypothetical construction becomes important when working with students on what might seem to be trivial levels. Seemingly insignificant exchanges between the student and the educator can sometimes encourage commu-

nication “within” the student and may lead to positive transactionally achieved growth of which the educator may or may not be aware.

For example, this can sometimes occur as a result of comments made, or not made, in the margin or at the end of an essay. The educator may facilitate in the student the development and continued construction of his or her position by reflecting back to the student what the educator takes to be the main argument or underlying point and this may or may not be something the student has yet come to consciously embrace. Here the educator is responsively perceptive to the meaning-creating nature of the student and the student-educator relationship and is assisting the student in his or her growth and continued transaction with new meanings and new arguments.

The student originally submits the essay with one sense of self-definition but comes away with an enriched sense of who he or she is and with, perhaps, a higher level of conscious awareness of this new understanding. Of course, the student could choose not to embrace the suggested meaning; however, the student still comes out with at least a better sense of who he or she is not. Further, the student gains an added awareness that the reader (the educator) is constantly trying to construct meaning from what the student has written. With this exchange, the student has been transactionally defined and so too has the educator because the educator also, to a certain extent, comes to define himself or herself as that person who agrees or disagrees with what he or she has suggested as the student’s intended meaning and has further defined himself or herself as a person who assists others in defining themselves in and through this type of exchange.

Some may correctly object that this kind of meaning-forming dialogue occurs in educational relationships that this author has otherwise critiqued; however, this is part of the point. As human beings, and especially as educators, we cannot help but participate in these types of co-constituting transactional exchanges. However, our level of conscious and intentional awareness of this participation and the level to which we partake in these transactions purposefully and with

an end in mind makes important differences. At times these differences are easily identifiable – such as when an educator simply dismisses students efforts to communicate in a personal way, i.e. in a way that makes evident their contextually nuanced existence. At other times, however, these differences are embedded and concealed on a level that is more emotionally based, on a level that is often sensed but not easily described -- such as when an advisor reliably fulfills all tangible obligations to the advisee but otherwise is emotionally detached and only “present” to the student in a perfunctory way.⁹ Yes, in this case, the transactional aspect of the relationship is present; however, the exchanges that do and do not occur are not purposefully ameliorative in nature, i.e., they are not driven by a desire to capitalize on the “better-making”¹⁰ potential of the exchanges being had between the student and the educator.

Further, the educator may transact with the student without pairing the transactions with what I shall call, borrowing from Dewey’s notion of intelligence, intelligent empathy and care. Here the idea is that the kind of transaction that will be most conducive to producing ameliorative outcomes and potentialities is one which has a emotional, caring, even loving¹¹ component where the concepts are further modified by the concept of intelligence. “Intelligent” empathy, “intelligent” caring, and “intelligent” loving are intelligent because the empathy, care, and love are not simply visceral; rather, there is amelioratively proscriptive purpose and direction behind the emotively driven response. This response seeks to connect with the transactional other in ways that are imaginatively forward looking, attending to both the positive and the negative possibilities of the transaction and seeking to capitalize on those possibilities that are ameliorative in nature. These responses are amelioratively proscriptive because they seek to make not only the situations better in the immediate sense, but they also look forward to the future with an eye toward making the educational classroom, community, home, etc. a better place, i.e., a more consciously transactional place.

Learning to approach situations using “hypothetical construction,” informed by Socratic wisdom and accompanied by intelligent and imaginative empathy, helps students develop what Dewey calls the “habit of using intelligence fully,” i.e., the habit of using intelligence as a guide to present action, which will lead to control and resolution, if only temporarily, of future contingencies.¹² Having this “habit of using intelligence fully” allows those possessing it to not only negotiate the student-educator relationship, but also helps in the negotiation of more complex life situations, some of which tend to erupt in classroom situation. These eruptions can become, if embraced, moments of growth and understanding.

For example, during a recent class my students were engaged in a conversation about the unrecognized power that comes with being white, and especially with being a white male in our society. One of my students, a white male, while attempting to provide an example of how this was, in fact, true, pointed out that some of the most offensive derogatory terms used in our culture seemed to connect with either being black or being female. This student gave examples and stated a descriptively derogatory term, often referred to as the “N-word,” explicitly and repeatedly in his example. There was, even though he was agreeing with the larger point being made, an almost immediate sense of tension in the classroom.

It was evident that many students had an immediate negative response to the use of the term, regardless of its intended use. In response, there was a collective stiffening of the class. I too found myself having a negative visceral response that made me feel uneasy both because of the tension I suspected this might cause and because of something internal to my bodily-lived experience that felt ill at ease with the simple mentioning of the word, regardless of context. I asked the class if they too were experiencing the same response. This led to a discussion that required trying to tease-out the source of the tension. As a result, we all came to better understand the effect using this word might have, especially on those who may have experienced being called that term in a derogatory way.

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Further, as a class we learned that sometimes words bring with them certain contextualized and embodied historical meanings that can impede the reception of intended communication if the word is used, even in a seemingly benign way, to communicate a thought. Through this conversation, we were all witness to and participants in hypothetical construction and an example of how meaning was created transactionally rather than existing as a fixed and unchanging entity outside of particular context and use. By approaching this issue this way, the students came to see that the life experiences and cultural contexts matter when trying to communicate effectively and that there is no such thing as a decontextualized meaning to which all can refer in an abstract sense.

This situation exemplified how communication can be improved if the educator recognizes the transactional nature of the communication relationship between the student and the educator. Doing so allows the meaning as intended to meet, transact with, and hence modify the meaning as received, leading to improved understanding and connection among individuals and to the creation of new meanings. While our conversation about this situation in class did not remove the tension, the tension shifted and lessened. Further, this exchange of ideas and experiences did serve to modify the meaning and experience of the culturally and racially charged term and helped to enrich future conversations. Moreover, all students, I'd like to think, felt intelligently and empathetically received. Where this emotively charged topic could have been treated from a distance and purely on a "minded" level; it was instead brought to the necessarily "body-minded" plane of our existence and thereby capitalized on the ameliorative potential that was possible in this transaction. Failure to address this would have sent the message that it is the literal meaning and communication of terms that matter within academia and that our bodily ways of communicating and knowing are either inconsequential or inappropriate in the end to the truth and knowledge seeking environment of the classroom.

Further, as a result of this communication and others like it, at least some of the students shifted their view on the world, if only

slightly. A previously held habit of interpreting the world as given was exchanged with the habit of consciously and intelligently transacting with the world as a moral and epistemological agent who can create meaning and affect change through on-going dialogue with others. These students now know that meaning is created in and through contextual relationships with particular others and that it is through this mutual creation of meaning that agency, the ability to affect change, is most powerfully executed.

IV. Conclusion

By understanding and embracing a transactional conception of the individual, educators come to view the content of what they teach within broader contexts and as constantly in the process of being created and re-created. The content, rather than being static, fixed, and existing outside of contextual contingencies, is necessarily contextually located. With this in mind, the good educator will not only approach the students and the teaching of content differently, but he or she will also help the students become “Socratically wise” in and through their interactions with the world and with their continued quest of knowledge; the education will help the student develop intelligent empathy and, in connection with this, the “habit of using intelligence fully.” Rather than elevating ourselves above the contextual contingencies and limitations of our humanness, we must immerse ourselves in these contexts. When this is done, the possibility for genuine human growth and human knowing is possible. To foster this habit in students is to foster the habit of being and becoming an intelligently transactional and positively transforming moral agent and is to do so as an agent of change within education.

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ENDNOTES

1. The three metaphors of the stew, tossed salad, and the melting pot are in reference to the analysis of transactional bodies offered by Shannon Sullivan in her work *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional*

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Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001: 12-16.

2. Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct*, MW 14: 29.
3. This is similar to what Scott Pratt argues regarding the goal as conceived by contemporary pragmatism in chapter two of *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002: especially p. 37. Here Pratt argues that American pragmatist scholars tend to share, despite their differences, four common commitments: interaction, pluralism, community and growth.
4. Shannon Sullivan introduces these concepts on pp. 75-79 of her previously mentioned work, *Living Across and Through Skins*.
5. Sullivan, 75.
6. *Ibid.*, 77. See also Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony & Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
7. *Ibid.*, 75-76
8. *Ibid.*, 76.
9. Nel Noddings' notion of the moral obligation of disposability, within reason, to the one-cared for and a need to provide dialogue, practice, and positive attribution for and to the cared-for. See Chapter 4 of Noddings' *Caring*.
10. The author has capitalized on the "better-making" potential of the situation when the student comes to see the transactional meaning and identity making process more explicitly.
11. With this reference to 'loving' and later references to 'love,' this author does not intend what is perhaps the immediate connotation of the term; rather, the conception of 'love' intended is more of a Platonic love that is responsively perceptive to the position, needs, wants and concerns of the other. This is "felt" in the whole being of the other on an almost intuitive level rather than known in the mind or felt by the body.
12. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, MW14:184. Elsewhere in this same work, Dewey refers to this as the "habit of learning" where the meaning of education "consists in an intelligent direction of native activities in light of the possibilities and necessities of the social situation." (See pp. 69-70 and 75.)

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